

JFK: The Vietnam Question

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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PURPOSE OF THESIS

This paper is a discussion of John F. Kennedy and his policies concerning Vietnam. The main focus is to examine the theory that John F. Kennedy would have removed American forces from Vietnam after his reelection. A history of United States involvement in Vietnam is presented to allow the appropriate setting for Kennedy's term in office. Kennedy's policies and decisions concerning Vietnam while he was in office are outlined in full detail to determine what his policy might have been had he served a second term in office. The theory that Kennedy would have withdrawn American troops from Vietnam is argued from both sides by using selected facts and quotations from those who were close to President Kennedy. The events in Vietnam following the assassination of President Kennedy are examined to determine their possible impact on Kennedy's future decisions toward Vietnam. Finally, a conclusion is offered based on the facts presented.

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The presidency of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is perhaps the most intriguing of any United States President. When Kennedy came to office, he offered America a chance at his "New Frontier." This New Frontier was a call to all Americans for a peaceful revolution for human rights and an end to racial discrimination. Kennedy was the President that passed the torch of leadership in the United States to a new generation. He represented the hope that a new era of liberty would reach across the globe. When President Kennedy was assassinated, that hope was gone. All that remained was the question of what might have been had Kennedy lived to serve a second term as President.

The many mysteries surrounding the life, and specifically the presidency, of John F. Kennedy have captivated the American public. His alleged involvement with Hollywood movie star Marilyn Monroe and the still mysterious circumstances surrounding his assassination have made John F. Kennedy into a popular cultural figure. Many of the questions that the American public would like to have answered about Kennedy's presidency and what might have been had he not been assassinated will never be fully answered. In the film JFK directed by Oliver Stone, the director explores the theory that Kennedy's assassination was connected to his plan to withdraw American troops from South Vietnam. Stone has a way of blending fact with fiction that leaves the viewer believing that President Kennedy's plan to withdraw from Vietnam was a foregone conclusion.

This paper attempts to deal with the question of President Kennedy's plan to withdraw American forces from Vietnam. After researching the topic, I believe John F. Kennedy would not have ended United States involvement in Vietnam after his reelection.

Before proceeding any further it is important to understand a brief history of Vietnam and the record of American involvement in that region. The government

in South Vietnam was led by President Ngo Dinh Diem from 1954 to 1963. He was fighting for an independent and anti-Communist Vietnam. The Communist force against Diem was a guerrilla movement called the Viet Cong.¹ The beginning of serious involvement by the United States in Vietnam can be traced to the Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Eisenhower started his foreign policy by continuing with the Truman policy of working with other western allies to contain Communism. This included helping the French in their effort to fight the Communists in South Vietnam. In 1954 the French surrendered their effort and prepared to withdraw from the region.² A conference was set up in Geneva to determine the future of Vietnam. The 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, creating a Communist North Vietnam and a non-Communist South Vietnam.³ As the French were leaving the region, the United States assumed the task of aiding the South Vietnamese in their fight against Communism. Eisenhower made a pledge to help South Vietnam against Communist aggression. The President wrote Diem in 1954 and said that America would "assist the government of Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means."⁴ To help combat Communist aggression in Southeast Asia, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was formed. The countries in the organization included the United States, France, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, and the Philippines.⁵ SEATO provided the means for which joint action could be taken in the event of Communist aggression. Eisenhower used the SEATO agreement to justify American involvement in Southeast Asia.

Eisenhower never wavered in his conviction that South Vietnam was of grave importance to American foreign policy. In his State of the Union Address in 1953, Eisenhower said France was "holding the line of freedom in Indochina against

the calculated assault of Communist aggression throughout the world.”⁶ It was Eisenhower who applied the “domino theory” to Southeast Asia. The domino theory was the belief that if one country falls to Communism, surrounding countries will become Communist in quick succession.⁷ Eisenhower said, “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is that it will go over very quickly. So you have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”⁸

To stop the spread of Communism, Eisenhower developed the “New Look” defense strategy. This strategy sought economic ways to contain Communism, namely covert operations and the threat of nuclear force.⁹ The President was frightened at the thought of using American ground forces in Vietnam.¹⁰ Instead, he stressed the need for massive retaliation against Communist aggression led by United States air power. On January 5, 1954 Eisenhower told bipartisan congressional leaders that the United States would “hit them [the Viet Cong] with everything we’ve got. We have the weapons and the planes to do it.”¹¹ Eisenhower ultimately wanted to buy time for the South Vietnamese government to gain strength and offer a viable alternative to the Communists. The United States supported President Diem as the best hope for Vietnamese resistance against the Communists. During his term, Eisenhower sent eight hundred military advisors to South Vietnam to aid Diem. By the end of his administration, Eisenhower had bound the American government with the government of Diem in South Vietnam.¹²

While Eisenhower was developing American foreign policy as President, Kennedy was serving his country as a member of the United States Congress. Kennedy represented the Eleventh Congressional District from Massachusetts in the House of Representatives from 1947 to 1952. He was elected Senator from

Massachusetts in 1952 and served in that position until being elected President in 1960.¹³ During his time in Congress, Kennedy spoke out in favor of independence for Indochina and he publicly backed the domino theory. When President Kennedy took office, he made three major decisions concerning Vietnam: to increase the Eisenhower commitment, to make the survival of the Diem government a major objective in foreign policy, and to hold the line against Communist guerrilla activity.¹⁴

To gain insight into what John Kennedy's policy on Vietnam might have been had he served a second term in office, it is logical to look at his record concerning the situation in Vietnam while he was in office. In his Inaugural Address, Kennedy stressed the policy of containing Communism. He said,

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life . . . Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty . . . To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required, not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right.¹⁵

Shortly after taking office, Kennedy ordered five hundred special forces and other military advisors to South Vietnam. This marked the first time the United States had more advisors in South Vietnam than were allowed under the Geneva Accords.¹⁶ By the end of 1961, Kennedy had increased the number of United States advisors in Vietnam from eight hundred to sixteen thousand.¹⁷ By the end of 1962, United States aircraft had been used to carry South Vietnamese troops into battle, and United States pilots had flown hundreds of missions and had fired on Viet Cong troops.¹⁸ Kennedy strongly believed in the importance of American

involvement in Southeast Asia, but he did not want to fight a war in that region. He did not want the situation in Vietnam to escalate into a full scale war that involved American troops in combat. In 1963 he said, "I'll never send draftees over there to fight."¹⁹

Had Kennedy lived to serve a second term, this statement might have very well been true. But, the question here is whether he would have ended American involvement altogether. John Kennedy did sign an order to reduce American military personnel in Vietnam by one thousand men before he died. This order was issued during a period of optimism in September of 1963. The order to bring one thousand troops home from Vietnam had not yet been executed when Kennedy was assassinated. It is the only order Kennedy ever issued that planned to remove troops from Vietnam.

Kennedy did not live long enough to execute the troop reduction order, nor did he live long enough to see the results of a major event in Vietnam. This event was the assassination of President Diem. By the Fall of 1963, the United States was beginning to separate itself from Diem. The separation had started with a political crisis involving the Buddhists in South Vietnam. In May 1963 a group of Buddhists met to celebrate the birthday of Buddha. South Vietnamese troops asked the Buddhists to disperse, and when they did not, the government troops opened fire and killed nine Buddhists.²⁰ The Buddhists began a series of protests which became a spearhead for all the dissident groups in South Vietnam. Under pressure from the United States, Diem negotiated a partial settlement with the Buddhists in July 1963. It soon became clear, however, that Diem would not follow through with the concessions he had promised.²¹ Kennedy felt uneasy about the possibility of not backing Diem, but many of his advisors felt the effort in Vietnam could not be won with Diem in control. At the end of August and through September, there was a

series of cables between South Vietnam and Washington discussing the possibility of a coup against Diem and his government.²² Although Kennedy never officially authorized the coup of Diem's government, he let that eventual outcome happen by not acting to stop it.²³ Kennedy had cut aid to South Vietnam which sent a message to dissenters that the United States was growing intolerant of the Diem government. Kennedy also gave wide latitude to Henry Cabot Lodge, the American Ambassador to Vietnam, who had a well known animosity toward Diem.²⁴ By giving Lodge room to act, Kennedy in effect let the coup take place. The CIA reported on November 1, 1963 that a coup was likely to occur that day.²⁵ The coup did take place, and President Diem was assassinated in the process. Upon hearing of the assassination, Kennedy was shocked. Maxwell Taylor, who was with Kennedy when he received the information, said, "Kennedy leaped to his feet and rushed from the room with such a look of shock and dismay on his face which I had never seen before."²⁶ The assassination of Diem only created a more unstable situation in South Vietnam. The government there demonstrated frequent political changes and a revolving door of military and civilian leaders. The declining situation in Vietnam erased the optimism that was present before Kennedy's death and surely would have affected his decision making concerning Vietnam.

Although it may seem that the situation in Vietnam was the main focus in American foreign policy during Kennedy's term in office, in reality, Vietnam was overshadowed by several other events. The first of these events was the crisis in Berlin in 1961. Khrushchev, the Russian Premier, wanted the Allies (the United States, France, and Great Britain) out of West Berlin. This would enable all of Berlin to be under Communist rule. Kennedy did not want to pull out of West Berlin because he was afraid that West Germany would turn against the United States and leave NATO.²⁷ Since the situation pitted the United States against

Russia, the threat of nuclear war became very strong in the minds of the American people. Khrushchev actually wanted to take over West Berlin because many East Germans were crossing over into West Berlin, which was becoming a thriving industrial city.²⁸ Because Kennedy made a firm stand against Khrushchev, the Russian Premier gave up on the idea of a Communist West Berlin. Instead he decided to solve the problem by having the East Germans build the Berlin Wall. The wall was built on East German territory, and it effectively stemmed the tide of East German refugees.

The next major events in foreign policy concerned the country of Cuba. When Kennedy came into the White House, the plan to overthrow Castro with Cuban refugees was already set to take place at the Bay of Pigs. The United States CIA organized, trained, and transported fourteen thousand Cuban exiles for the invasion.²⁹ The revolt was crushed within three days and ended with the capture of the anti-Castro Cubans. Kennedy publicly took the blame for the failed invasion. The other event in Cuba was the Cuban missile crisis. An Air Force U-2 reconnaissance plane had discovered that the Soviets had been building missile bases in Cuba. President Kennedy made it very clear that the United States would risk the brink of war in order to remove the missiles from Cuba. The Cuban missile crisis lasted for two weeks until Khrushchev finally removed the missiles.

Although these events and the cold war crises overshadowed what was happening in Southeast Asia, they did have an impact on the situation there. Kennedy's firm stand against Khrushchev weakened the image of the Soviet leader with the Chinese. This caused a break in the alliance between the Soviets and the Chinese. Kennedy felt a settlement could have been reached with the Viet Cong if Khrushchev had been more powerful in Asia.³⁰ With the weakened alliance between Russia and China, the threat of a Chinese move against South Vietnam

increased. This impending threat provoked the first buildup of American advisory troops in Vietnam.³¹

Even in Southeast Asia, the main focus when Kennedy came to office was on the situation in Laos. The Communists wanted to overtake the neutral country of Laos, but Kennedy warned Khrushchev that he backed Laotian neutrality. The President moved aircraft carriers into the South China Sea and landed Marines in Thailand to show his determination for Laotian neutrality. Khrushchev agreed to make a political settlement on Laos because he did not want to get involved in a conventional land war in Asia.³² Again, if Khrushchev had more influence in Asia, a settlement may have been reached in that region as well. The situation in Laos showed Kennedy's strong desire to stop the spread of Communism and his willingness to use military action to insure this course of action would never take place.

Although Kennedy was against the spread of Communism, he first had doubts about United States involvement in Vietnam in 1961 when he met with General Douglas MacArthur. In the fourth month of his presidency, Kennedy sought MacArthur's advice on the situation in Vietnam. MacArthur warned Kennedy against the commitment of American soldiers to the Asian mainland.³³ He said the Asian mainland was no place to be fighting a non-nuclear land war. MacArthur's argument made quite an impression on the President. According to General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Kennedy, President Kennedy would often tell the Joint Chiefs of Staff to convince MacArthur that the United States presence in Vietnam was necessary.³⁴ Kennedy said if MacArthur was convinced, then he would be convinced. MacArthur's advice to Kennedy may have been influenced by his resentment toward former President Eisenhower and his commitment to Vietnam. When MacArthur was relieved

from duty by President Truman for exceeding his authority in Korea, MacArthur spoke out against Truman and his policies. MacArthur openly campaigned against Truman's reelection and Eisenhower's campaign for the Republican nomination.³⁵ MacArthur may have told Kennedy to stay out of Vietnam because it was Eisenhower who started the United States commitment there. Whatever his motives may have been, MacArthur's advice had a lasting impression on President Kennedy. "The last thing he [Kennedy] wanted," General Taylor later said, "was to put in our ground forces."³⁶

Kennedy received similar advice from Charles De Gaulle. De Gaulle was the President of France, which had fought in Vietnam in the early 1950's. The French war effort in Vietnam collapsed in the spring of 1954.³⁷ De Gaulle explained to Kennedy that the French had shown the hopelessness of fighting in Vietnam. "For you," De Gaulle said, "intervention in this region will be an entanglement without end."³⁸ De Gaulle's words foreshadowed the eventual American involvement in Vietnam.

The theory that John Kennedy would have removed American forces from Vietnam had he been elected to a second term in office gained national attention in 1970 when Kenneth O'Donnell made such a claim in a Life magazine article. Kenneth O'Donnell was Kennedy's Appointments Secretary. O'Donnell was a Massachusetts Irishman who worked with Kennedy since his 1946 Congressional campaign.³⁹ O'Donnell had a close relationship to the President while staying virtually anonymous to the press during Kennedy's term in office. O'Donnell was perhaps closer to John Kennedy than anyone, except the president's brother, Robert Kennedy.⁴⁰ O'Donnell's statement in the Life magazine article was excerpted from his then forthcoming book about Kennedy's life. O'Donnell said that Kennedy told him before his ill-fated trip to Texas that he wanted to win the 1964 election by a

landslide because he was going to make the unpopular decision of withdrawing all American troops from Vietnam soon after his reelection.⁴¹ Kennedy had decided, said O'Donnell, that America's involvement would only grow more steady and costly without making a dent in the larger political problem of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. O'Donnell has always maintained that, although Kennedy never made any public statements that he was considering American withdrawal, the President would have brought American troops home before the end of 1965. Along with O'Donnell, other close aides to Kennedy have stated that he spoke privately of pulling out of Vietnam.

Senator Mike Mansfield, who was the Senate majority leader in 1963, confirmed O'Donnell's account that the President had wanted to withdraw United States forces from Vietnam. "He had definitely and unequivocally made that decision," Mansfield was quoted as saying in the Washington Post in 1970.⁴² Senator Mansfield had long been a proponent of United States withdrawal from Vietnam. He returned from a trip to Southeast Asia in late 1962 and told Kennedy that he should consider withdrawal. Kennedy later said, "I got angry with Mike for disagreeing with our policy so completely, and I got angry with myself because I found myself agreeing with him."⁴³ Mansfield said that in the spring of 1963 Kennedy told him that he had serious second thoughts concerning Mansfield's argument and that Kennedy now agreed with the Senator's thinking on the need for withdrawal. Mansfield quoted Kennedy as saying, "But we can't do it until after 1965, after I'm reelected . . . In 1965 I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser."⁴⁴ Mansfield says Kennedy feared a conservative outcry against his reelection if he announced his plans for withdrawal before the election. " . . . But I can do it after we are reelected," said Kennedy, "So we had better make damned sure that I am reelected."⁴⁵ Mansfield's statements give further evidence that

Kennedy spoke privately about the possibility of withdrawing American forces from Vietnam.

Along with O'Donnell and Mansfield, Robert McNamara believes that Kennedy was going to pull out of Vietnam. McNamara was Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, and he continued in this capacity under President Johnson. McNamara says the plan to withdraw was true. He says he had "an understanding with Kennedy that they would close out Vietnam by sixty-five, whether it was in good shape or bad."⁴⁶ This statement does not seem valid, however, when compared to McNamara's later policies concerning American involvement in Vietnam. In early 1965 McNamara stressed how vital the United States' stakes were in Vietnam. He said he believed the United States should be committed to keeping South Vietnam from Communism. "No region is more vulnerable and exposed to Communist subversion than Southeast Asia," said McNamara.⁴⁷ McNamara also said referring to United States involvement in Vietnam in the late 1960's: "My belief was that we were having difficulty militarily, but we still had a chance of progressing on the political track as a result of our military pressure. If I didn't believe that, I should have strongly recommended withdrawing from Vietnam."⁴⁸ Also, McNamara has no record of dissenting when President Johnson sent troops into North Vietnam. The Pentagon Papers states McNamara's position as wanting to hold the line on United States personnel in Vietnam. It gave no mention of the withdrawal of troops.⁴⁹ McNamara's statements on America's withdrawal from Vietnam seem confusing and are contradictory at best. Perhaps they can best be explained by Deborah Shapley, McNamara's biographer, when she stated,

I found myself suspecting, in interviews with McNamara and when reviewing the above quotes for publication, that his sincere belief that Kennedy would have gotten out of Vietnam was something he arrived at later, when the war had become tragic and traumatic for him and the nation . . . and the temptation to self deceive, to believe that his hero

and mentor would have wisely guided them out, must still be very strong.⁵⁰

Thus, Shapley suggests that McNamara's opinion that Kennedy would have pulled out of Vietnam may be based on hopeful optimism rather than genuine conviction.

Along with those who say Kennedy had a plan to completely withdraw from Vietnam, there are others close to Kennedy who claim that no consideration was given to pulling out of Vietnam. The most outspoken proponent of the notion that Kennedy would not have withdrawn American troops from Vietnam has been Dean Rusk, Secretary of State under Kennedy. Rusk served under Kennedy and also served as Secretary of State under President Johnson. Rusk strongly supported American involvement in Vietnam. He said, "We never seriously considered the option of outright withdrawal and allowing South Vietnam to be overrun by the Communists."⁵¹ When Rusk heard of O'Donnell's claims that Kennedy was going to pull out of Vietnam, he offered his own opinion on the subject. Referring to the withdrawal he said, "Despite his frustration over Vietnam, I do not believe John Kennedy came to any such decision."⁵²

On a different occasion, again referring to the withdrawal, Rusk stated, "I had hundreds of talks with John F. Kennedy about Vietnam, and never once did he say anything of this sort to his own Secretary of State."⁵³ Rusk felt Kennedy would not have waited until after the election to start a withdrawal. He said if Kennedy had waited until after the election, "He would have left Americans in a combat zone for domestic political purposes, and no President can do that."⁵⁴ Rusk offered an explanation for O'Donnell's theory about the supposed withdrawal. He said,

Kennedy liked to bat the breeze and toss ideas around, and it is entirely possible that he left the impression with some that he planned on getting out of Vietnam in 1965. But that does not mean that he made a decision in 1963 to withdraw in 1965. Had he done so, I think I would have known about it . . . President Kennedy's attitude on Vietnam should be derived from what he said and did while president, not what

he may have said at tea table conversations or walks around the Rose Garden.⁵⁵

It is clear that Rusk felt Kennedy was committed to American involvement and any suggestion that he was going to withdraw from Vietnam was merely speculation.

Another key figure in the Kennedy White House at this time was General Maxwell Taylor. General Taylor became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962. Taylor was in favor of American involvement in Vietnam and never suggested withdrawal. He said, "It never occurred to me to recommend withdrawal. There were too many reasons for not thinking about retreat. In the first place, we had not exhausted our alternatives or made inroads into our vast resources."⁵⁶ Taylor had criticized the New Look strategy of Eisenhower because he felt the threat of nuclear war was impractical. Instead, Taylor suggested the United States be ready for a "Flexible Response" in the face of Communist aggression. The Doctrine of Flexible Response called for waging limited wars in situations that were of national interest.⁵⁷ Taylor felt the United States Army should be combat-ready in order to wage a quick and successful strike if needed. It is clear Taylor believed the American forces could be successful in stopping Communist aggression. In late September and early October of 1963, Taylor went on a fact finding mission with Secretary of State McNamara to Vietnam. The report these two men submitted to the President on their return stated that the situation in Vietnam was serious, but showed signs of optimism.⁵⁸ It was the optimism in this report that prompted Kennedy to announce the plan to withdraw one thousand troops from Vietnam. He made this announcement because he thought the war was going well, and he thought the amount of advisors could be reduced.⁵⁹

Besides stating his opinion on American involvement in Vietnam, General Taylor also offers insight into the importance of Robert Kennedy, President

Kennedy's younger brother, in the decision making process of the White House. In his autobiography, Taylor says, "As I meditated on ways and means to serve President Kennedy, I often sought the advice of Bob Kennedy as to what was feasible and what was incompatible with the President's natural way of doing business."⁶⁰ This statement suggests that Robert Kennedy was very knowledgeable of his brother's policies, and he most likely knew his brother's thoughts on many important subjects.

For this reason, the most important figure in proving that Kennedy was not going to remove American forces from Vietnam is perhaps Robert Kennedy. Robert served as Attorney General under his brother John. Kenneth O'Donnell said that Robert was closer to John than anyone. If President Kennedy had a plan to pull out of Vietnam by the end of 1965, it is likely that Robert Kennedy would have known about it. Had Robert Kennedy known about a plan to withdraw from Vietnam, it is likely that he would have made that information public after his brother's death, but Robert Kennedy never made any mention of a secret plan to withdraw American forces from Vietnam.

Robert Kennedy always maintained strong support for American involvement in Vietnam during his brother's presidency and in the years following his death. In February of 1962, Robert spent a few hours in Saigon. While he was there, he said, "We are going to win the war in Vietnam. We will remain here until we do win."⁶¹ Later he said, "I think the American people understand and fully support this struggle. I think the United States will do what is necessary to help a country that is trying to repel aggression with its own blood, tears and sweat."⁶²

After John Kennedy's assassination, Robert stressed the need for peace talks and was against further escalation in Vietnam, however, he was still against a total withdrawal. Even in 1965, the year the alleged withdrawal was supposed to be

completed, Robert said, "withdrawal would mean a repudiation of commitments undertaken and confirmed by three administrations and would gravely - perhaps irreparably - weaken the democratic position in Asia."⁶³ In 1964 Robert Kennedy explained the situation in Vietnam in his book Pursuit of Justice by saying, "This kind of warfare can be long-drawn-out and costly, but if Communism is to be stopped, it is necessary."⁶⁴ Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote biographies on both John and Robert Kennedy, summed up Robert's views on America's involvement in Southeast Asia by stating,

Robert's own understanding of his brother's position, as he expounded it to John Bartlow Martin in the spring of 1964, was that John Kennedy felt 'we should win the war' because the loss of Vietnam would mean the fall of the rest of Southeast Asia; that there had been no consideration given to pulling out and at the same time no disposition to go further in.⁶⁵

Later in the interview, Martin asked Robert Kennedy, "If the South Vietnamese were about to lose, would John Kennedy have sent ground forces?" Robert responded by saying, "Well, we'd have faced that when we came to it."⁶⁶ The fact that Robert's response uses the word "we" when asked what his brother would have done is very significant. It shows that Robert Kennedy was very aware of President Kennedy's policy on Vietnam, and that Robert would have been involved in the decisions concerning Vietnam. The strong likelihood that Robert Kennedy knew of his brother's plans for Vietnam and the fact that he never mentioned a plan to withdraw from Vietnam offer strong evidence that no plan ever existed.

The theory that Kennedy was going to pull out of Vietnam can only be based on speculation and hearsay. When the facts are examined, it is obvious that Kennedy felt the United States had a commitment in South Vietnam, and he did not want to back away from that commitment. The statements Kennedy made up to his death give justifications for American involvement in Vietnam, and they

offer no mention of withdrawal. Kennedy made it clear on two evening news shows in 1963 that he did not want American soldiers to go over and fight the war for the South Vietnamese, but he stressed the fact that the United States would help the South Vietnamese in whatever way it could. In an interview with Walter Cronkite of CBS on September 2 of that year, Kennedy said,

It is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can send them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisors . . . but in the final analysis it is their people and their government who have to win or lose this struggle . . . All we can do is help, and we are making it very clear, but I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake.⁶⁷

Just one week later on September 9, Kennedy was interviewed by David Brinkley for NBC. In that interview, Kennedy stated the reasons for United States involvement in Vietnam. He said,

I believe the domino theory. I think the the struggle is close enough. China is so large, looms up high just beyond the frontiers, that if South Vietnam went, it would not only give them an improved geographic position for a guerrilla assault on Malaya, but would also give the impression that the wave of the future in Southeast Asia was China and the Communists.⁶⁸

Later in that same interview, Kennedy expressed his feelings for the American people's impatience with the situation in Vietnam. He said,

What I am concerned about is that Americans will get impatient and say, because they don't like events in Southeast Asia or they don't like the government in Saigon, that we should withdraw. That only makes it easy for the Communists. I think we should stay. We should use our influence in as effective way as we can, but we should not withdraw.⁶⁹

On another occasion in September of 1963, Kennedy outlined the American policy on Vietnam. He said the policy is "a very simple policy. We want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home. That is our policy. I am sure it is the policy of the people of Vietnam. We are not there to

— see a war lost.”⁷⁰ On September 26, Kennedy again refuted the idea of withdrawal. He said, “So all those who suggest we withdraw, all those who suggest we should no longer ship our surplus food abroad or assist other countries, I could not disagree with them more.”⁷¹ It is clear that Kennedy endorsed American involvement in Vietnam wholeheartedly in his public statements. To gain an understanding of what Kennedy’s policy on Vietnam might have been in his second term in office, the actions of Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s successor in the White House, should be examined.

When Johnson assumed the presidency, he stated that he wanted to continue with the current policy on Vietnam established by Kennedy. The Pentagon Papers suggests that Johnson was planning to go ahead with the one thousand man withdrawal until estimates of the situation in Vietnam were seen as far less than optimistic. The planned reduction was executed, but it was merely an accounting exercise. Much of the reduction was part of the normal turnover cycle.⁷² Johnson continued with approximately the same level of advisors that Kennedy had established.

In August 1964, however, Johnson’s policy quickly changed. On August 2 and 3, North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin.⁷³ In response to these attacks, Johnson pushed for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, in which Congress gave Johnson the power to dispatch American troops to North Vietnam if he deemed it necessary.⁷⁴ This paved the way for an escalation in the war and total involvement on the part of the United States.

It is important to note that Johnson had the same advisors that Kennedy would have had in 1965, when Johnson ordered the retaliatory bombing of North Vietnam. Johnson received full support from his cabinet on the decision, including that of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Had Kennedy lived to serve his

second term as President, he might have been challenged by an event similar to the Tonkin Gulf incident. It is unclear if Kennedy would have ordered retaliatory strikes or started further escalation in the effort in Vietnam. It is unlikely, however, that he would have withdrawn American forces from Vietnam altogether.

There will always be aspects of President Kennedy's life that the American public will never fully understand. His policy toward American involvement in Vietnam, however, has been fully documented. Kennedy was always against Communist expansion. Kennedy's objectives in Vietnam were very clear: to contain Communism, avoid escalation on the part of the United States military, and put the South Vietnamese in a position to achieve a settlement on its own.⁷⁵ The President had shown his resolve against the Communists in the Cuban missile crisis, and it is likely he would have continued to defy the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia. President Kennedy did face an embarrassment in the Bay of Pigs fiasco and probably did not want to risk another embarrassment involving the military. Thus, it is possible that Kennedy would not have sent United States ground forces into North Vietnam.

There are those, like O'Donnell and McNamara, who have looked back at the situation in Vietnam and have concluded that Kennedy would have pulled American forces from that region. Kennedy may have considered the thought of pulling out of Vietnam on a few occasions, and he may have mentioned that idea to others. However, when speculations are put aside and the facts are examined, it is clear Kennedy had not made a decision to pull out of Vietnam. Robert Kennedy, the closest person to the President, never mentioned a secret plan to withdraw troops from Vietnam. In fact, he spoke out in favor of continued United States involvement after President Kennedy's assassination. Also, President Kennedy repeatedly spoke out in favor of American involvement in his public statements.

Even up to the day John Kennedy was assassinated, he defended the United States' involvement in Vietnam. The speech he was going to deliver at the Dallas Trade Mart on November 22 said, "Our assistance to these nations can be painful, risky and costly, as is true in Southeast Asia today. But we dare not weary of the task."⁷⁶

The theory that John Kennedy was going to remove American troops from Vietnam can only be based on speculation. Even President Kennedy could not have known in 1963 what events were going to happen in regard to Vietnam and how he would have reacted to them. Many people would like to believe that the young President would have correctly guided the American forces in Vietnam to a successful conclusion. The tragedy lies in the fact that the American public will never know.

NOTES

¹Mike Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, Vol. II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 2.

²David L. Anderson, Trapped By Success (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 4.

³Arthur M. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 536.

⁴Ibid.

⁵David L. Anderson, Shadow On The White House (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), p. 48.

⁶Anderson, Trapped By Success, p. 17.

⁷John Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 1971), p. 8.

⁸Schlesinger, A Thousand Days, p. 536.

⁹Anderson, Shadow On The White House, p. 45.

¹⁰William Bragg Ewald, Eisenhower The President (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), p. 107.

¹¹Ibid., p. 106.

¹²Ibid., p. 92.

¹³Galloway, The Kennedy's and Vietnam, p. 5.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵Theodore C. Sorenson, Kennedy (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 246.

¹⁶Dean Rusk, As I Saw It (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), p. 431.

¹⁷Galloway, The Kennedy's and Vietnam, p. 17.

¹⁸John M. Newman, JFK And Vietnam (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1992), p. 205.

¹⁹Kenneth P. O'Donnell, "Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye" (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1972), p. 382.

²⁰David Halberstam, The Best And The Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 250.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 259.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 264.

²³Anderson, Shadow On The White House, p. 80.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁶William J. Rust, Kennedy In Vietnam (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1985), p. 175.

²⁷O'Donnell, "Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye", p. 299.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Sorenson, Kennedy, p. 294.

³⁰O'Donnell, "Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye", p. 268.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 15.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 268.

³³William Manchester, American Caesar (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1978), p. 696.

³⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy And His Times (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), p. 704.

³⁵Manchester, American Caesar, p. 684.

³⁶Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy And His Times, p. 705.

³⁷Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam, p. 11.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹O'Donnell, "Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye", p. vii.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 13.

⁴²Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam, p. 50.

⁴³O'Donnell, "Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye", p. 15.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Deborah Shapley, Promise And Power (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1993), p. 262.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 296.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 410.

⁴⁹Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, p. 192.

⁵⁰Shapley, Promise And Power, p. 263.

⁵¹Rusk, As I Saw It, p. 434.

⁵²Ibid., p. 441.

⁵³Rust, Kennedy In Vietnam, p. x.

⁵⁴Rusk, As I Saw It, p. 441.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 442.

⁵⁶Maxwell Taylor, Swords And Plowshares (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), p. 327.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 165.

⁵⁸Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, p. 164.

⁵⁹Rusk, As I Saw It, p. 442.

- ⁶⁰Taylor, Swords And Plowshares, p. 199.
- ⁶¹Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy And His Times, p. 712.
- ⁶²Ibid., p. 713.
- ⁶³Ibid., p. 730.
- ⁶⁴Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam, p. 59.
- ⁶⁵Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy And His Times, p. 727.
- ⁶⁶Rust, Kennedy In Vietnam, p. x.
- ⁶⁷Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam, p. 67.
- ⁶⁸Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, p. 162.
- ⁶⁹Galloway, The Kennedy's And Vietnam, p. 43.
- ⁷⁰Rusk, As I Saw It, p. 442.
- ⁷¹Gravel, The Pentagon Papers, p. 830.
- ⁷²Ibid., p. 191.
- ⁷³Rusk, As I Saw It, p. 444.
- ⁷⁴Ibid., p. 445.
- ⁷⁵Sorenson, Kennedy, p. 652.
- ⁷⁶Newman, JFK And Vietnam, p. 457.

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